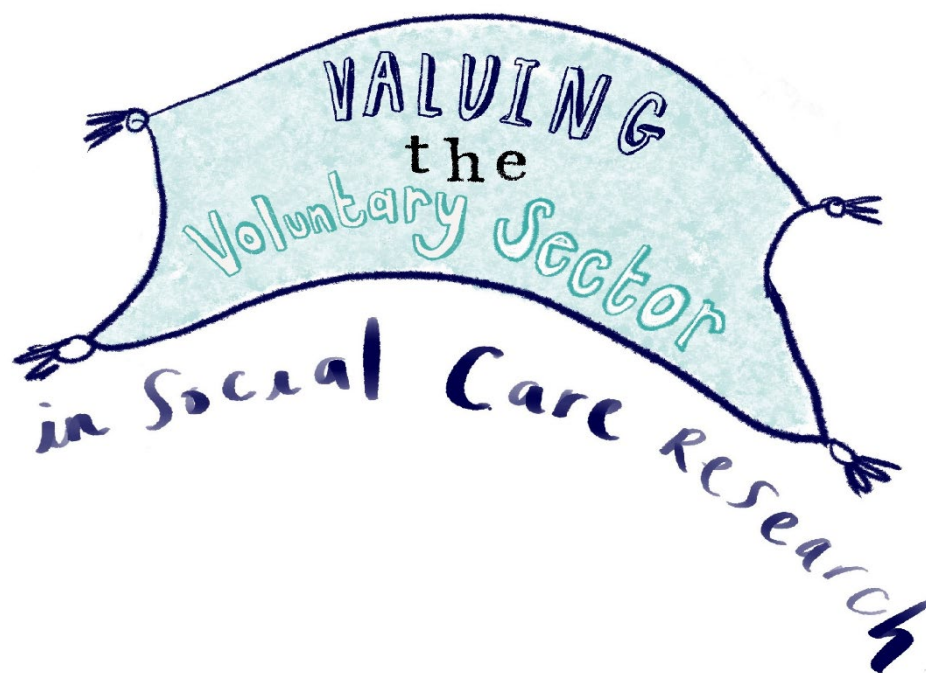# Valuing the role of the voluntary, community, faith and social enterprise sector in social care research full report

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About this report

The voluntary, community, faith and social enterprise (VCFSE) sector is a major source of health, care and wellbeing support to millions of people in England. It provides a very broad array of services, with and on behalf of statutory health and care providers, such as NHS trusts and local authority organisations. The VCFSE is large and diverse, particularly in social care, with over 31,000 charities working to improve the lives of elderly people, people with disabilities, and people living with mental health conditions, and those with a great many other needs. Many local VCFSE organisations have grown in response to unmet need. They are close to communities and, as such, are experts in identifying the assets, needs and aspirations of the people and communities they support. Organisations within the sector should be considered key partners delivering the National Institute for Health and Care Research's mission to improve the health and wealth of the nation through research and to bring research to underrepresented regions and communities with major health and care needs.

This report presents the findings of a piece of work undertaken by NIHR RDS in partnership with Birmingham Voluntary Service Council (BVSC), to explore VCFSE involvement in social care research. Three listening events were conducted in 2022: two cross regional and one national. The aim of the work was to understand the role of the VCFSE sector in social care research, identify barriers and facilitators to engagement, explore differences in barriers and facilitators for small and large VCFSE organisations, and identify good practice in VCFSE involvement in social care research. We also aimed to identify opportunities for further work.

BVSC co-designed and co-facilitated the events and collaborated on this report. The work was supported by the NIHR Research for Social Care (RfSC) programme team.

This report is intended to inspire and be used by researchers and research organisations, the National Institute for Health and Care Research, charities and the VCFSE sector, to better support the involvement of VCFSE organisations in social care research, and their role as research partners.

A list of useful resources to support VCFSE-researcher engagement is included at the end of this report. This list has been collated from a rapid scoping review of existing resources carried out by RDS West Midlands and RDS North West and has been sense-checked by BVSC Research. It includes resources which are available and accessible to both research and VCFSE organisations. It is not exhaustive.

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank all the event attendees for their honest, open and insightful contributions to the discussions. We have tried to represent views as faithfully as possible in this report. We would also like to thank the break-out room facilitators and note takers for each of our events.

As well as the authors, the wider team for this work included Catherine Gedling, Sarah Fallon, and Paul Dolby, RDS North West; Dr Chris Poyner, RDS West Midlands; and Bethan Laker, Illustrator.

Where we began

The Challenge

What are the practical and cultural challenges that prevent the VCFSE sector from getting involved in and accessing social care research?

What can research funders, researchers and the VCFSE sector do to address the challenges?

Starting Point

There are a number of VCFSE organisations engaged in social care research

There are some resources to help VCFSE organisations navigate the research system and engage in research

Opportunities

Co-produce resources to help VCFSE organisations overcome the challenges identified

Find innovative ways to share research outcomes so they are impactful

Risk

If we do not act, we fail to facilitate sustainable research communities that are essential to ensure we deliver high quality inclusive and impactful research that improves social care services and the lives of those who use those social care services

Understanding the role of the VCFSE sector in social care research

The VCFSE sector is essential to the delivery of social care services. As well as being a major source of social care support for people and families, the VCFSE also plays a vital role in addressing health inequalities, supporting and advocating for seldom heard or underrepresented communities, and for those who are most vulnerable and/or at risk of marginalisation. This is an exciting time for social care research, and NIHR has been at the forefront of developing increased opportunities for social care research. The VCFSE sector has a significant contribution to make to research about social care, and it is important that researchers engage with the VCFSE sector as a key partner.

The VCFSE contribution to social care research

VCFSE organisations have a huge amount of knowledge and insight into the needs of the people and communities they support and are expert at engaging with them. There is lot that the VCFSE sector can share with the research community about how to engage people with lived experience and work with communities in a way that enriches their experience of being involved in research.

VCFSE organisations can also help researchers to produce findings that are meaningful. Very often research findings are not user-friendly or accessible beyond academic audiences. Working with the VCFSE sector is important to generate evidence and shape findings that have the potential to make a real difference to people and communities.

VCFSE organisations are also skilled at doing research in their own right and there are many examples where VCFSE organisations are already leading and engaging in research. Their knowledge and expertise means VCFSE organisations are well placed to be able to help shape and influence research priorities. Too often however the sector is engaged late when carrying out research, it is engaged poorly, or it is not engaged at all.

Researcher engagement with the VCFSE sector

This report sets out how the research community can better engage with the VCFSE sector in social care research. We know that some researchers and VCFSE organisations already collaborate well. This report suggests how this emerging good practice can be built upon to create productive and sustainable research relationships. It acknowledges the many ways in which the sector already contributes to research and the increasing opportunities to become involved - as research leaders, partners/collaborators, advisors, participants, and as advocates and brokers for the people and communities they support.

The NIHR is committed to broadening its engagement with the VCFSE sector. The listening events that informed this report aimed to create a two-way dialogue between the research

community and the sector to share learning and to hear the perspectives of VCFSE organisations and researchers on the ground.

This report recognises that not 'one size fits all', and that different communities and organisations will experience different challenges in engaging in research. We aimed to understand what some of those distinct challenges were through this work. However, we recognise that there are some communities and voices who are still underrepresented. This report and recommendations therefore aim to be a starting point to encourage further engagement with groups that are seldom heard in current research.
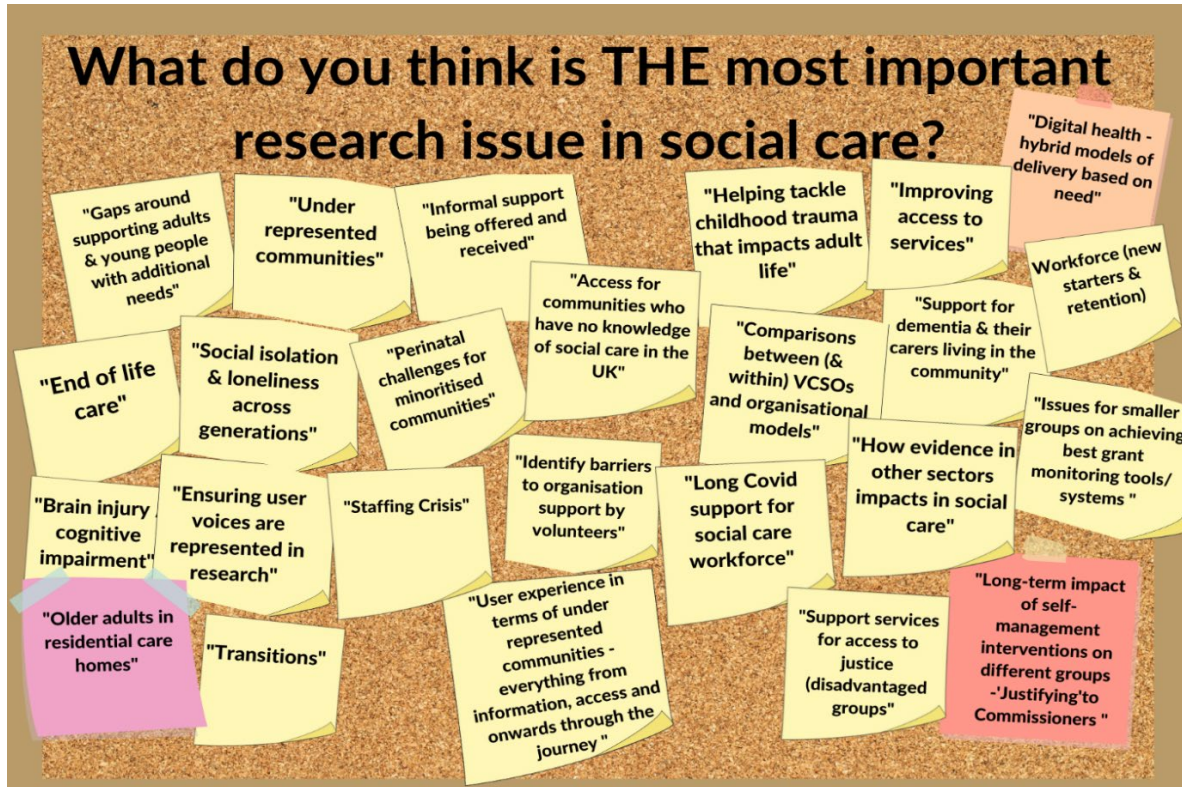
Some of the findings of this report are directly within researchers' responsibility to enact (such as involving VCFSE partners from the outset when developing research priorities and designing research), and some require action from VCFSE organisations. Others require research funders and other parts of the public sector to act. In these cases, the research community and VCFSE partners can work together to be a powerful voice and advocate for change.

We hope that this report prompts both discussion and action around how to better engage the VCFSE in social care research.
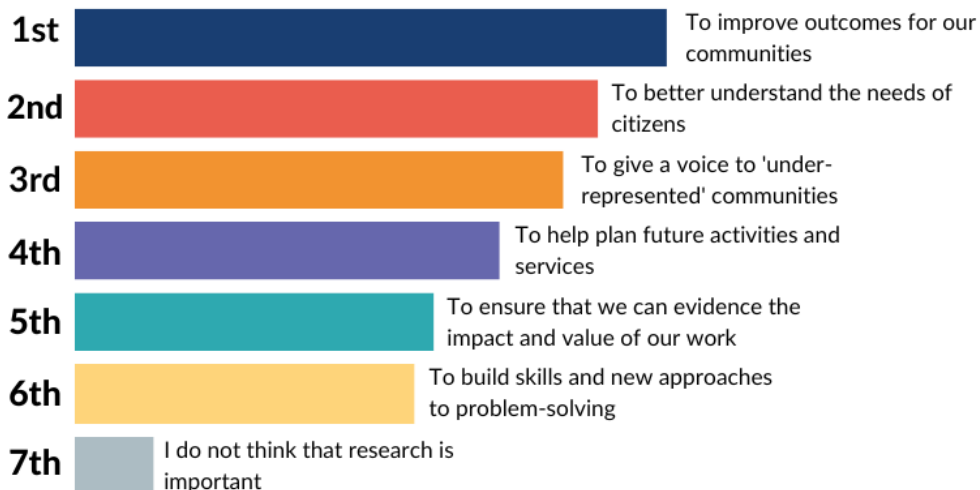
Regional Event 1

We asked event participants what they thought were the most important issues to research in social care:

We asked event participants what the most important benefits of research were to VCFSE organisations:
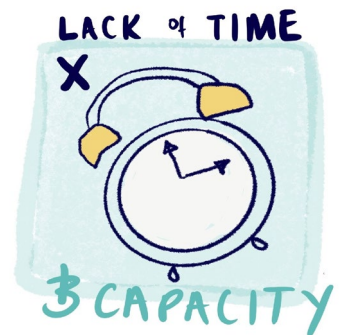
Barriers to engagement in social care research for VCFSE organisations

Time and capacity

We heard that there is often a lack of time and capacity for research among voluntary and community organisations, especially among small and medium sized organisations. Often the focus needs to be on supporting people and responding to frontline need, and this takes priority, especially when resources are strained. Event participants explained that there is a lack of time and space for reflection due to the "reactionary" nature of the sector, and a 'doing', rather than 'thinking' culture:

"We're can-do people in the voluntary and community sector...Culture of not sitting back and thinking of ways of doing things differently. There is a lack of time to ask, 'why did that happen?... Why did that go so well?... Why can they do it and we can't? and vice versa'. Reflective processes really need beefing up".

Research, or reflective processes that may lead to research, can therefore be treated as an add-on for some organisations, rather than being embedded in everyday practice. Some organisations do have dedicated research activity or capacity, but this tended to be larger organisations.

Lack of dedicated funding for VCFSE research

Event participants explained that space for thinking and reflection requires funding, and this was difficult to access and/or justify due to the financial fragility of the sector. We heard that getting research and evaluation funded within typical income streams (such as service delivery grants) can be difficult. Organisations have different funding bases, and priorities, and this can lead to difficulties in seeking out or prioritising getting funding for research activities.

We also heard that there is a lack of dedicated funding for research led by the sector, and that organisations struggle to access academic research funding. Often organisations do not "know where to start", or need to "find their own route in" to access research funding opportunities due to lack of shared information, especially when not linked in to wider networks. There can also be barriers in the process of applying for academic research funding itself, for example funding streams that may require universities or other types of research organisations to lead proposals. Some VCFSE organisations expressed a lack of confidence and familiarity with the application process and writing in a way that academic research funders would value, undermining their ability to engage.

Academic processes

Event participants discussed barriers in terms of other academic processes that prevented organisations engaging; for example, ethics, research recruitment and consent processes that can be time consuming and unfamiliar to some organisations. Some event participants expressed "feeling lost" in academic language, especially around research methodology, and a lack of clarity in what was being asked of them. This can lead to anxiety or research hesitancy, and preparation to ensure research readiness may be required for some organisations.

Some event participants stressed that the typically longer timescales for academic research could be a disincentive for organisations and the people they support as results felt "dated" by time of publication. This could also be prohibitive for organisations funded through short-term funding arrangements.

Costs of involvement and payment processes

Event participants explained there needs to be recognition that supporting research can place a burden on organisations and communities especially if the same organisations are frequently asked, as can be the case for researchers wanting to access marginalised or especially vulnerable groups. One organisation working with migrant groups explained they had received requests for research support from 12 different universities, leading to both the organisation and their clients feeling "bombarded" and a sense of "consultation fatigue". In this instance it was also felt that researchers did not recognise the additional costs required to support the language, interpretation, and cultural support needs of people, to facilitate their participation in research.

We heard that the financial costs of involvement need to be better reflected in researchers' funding bids. It was felt that one-off payments for organisations for research participation or collaboration were tokenistic and did not cover the full costs of the involvement (such as recruitment, materials, ongoing consultation, and support to individuals to participate). Furthermore, there was a feeling that the sector was vulnerable to being perceived as 'cheap' because of its voluntary nature, and as a result of underestimated costs of research involvement compared to universities or other more research-experienced organisations.

Renumeration and payment to VCFSE participants throughout their engagement in the research process was seen as important. Payment needed to include aspects such as travel expenses, and timings of research activity/sessions needed to be flexible to consider caring responsibilities or work commitments of those involved. Payment processes themselves however were seen as complicated and administratively burdensome. Organisations sometimes received remuneration from universities and would then have to

reimburse participants themselves, which could be complex to manage. Individuals' income from benefits could also be impacted by research renumeration and this could be a barrier. Better understanding of the impact, through liaison with DWP (Department of Work and Pensions), and guidance, could support this process.

Accessibility of research findings

The results of research need to be accessible to VCFSE organisations. Organisations were often not able to access academic journals, and findings are not always made available or disseminated in formats that are useable by communities. There was frustration where organisations were driving research in communities but could not share the eventual outputs in a way that was meaningful to those who had participated, to help them feel that they had made a difference.

Related to this we heard there needs to be recognition of the different motivations for engaging in research. For example, for academic researchers journal publication may be a key objective, while for communities, the motivation for taking part in research may be to achieve local change. Research results therefore need to be repurposed in ways that enable and facilitate wider change and impact for communities.

VCFSE accountability to their communities

We heard that researchers are not always sensitive to the needs of people relying on voluntary sector services and to their communities. This included cultural and language issues, such as non-English speaking clients, as well as the ongoing support needs of people to participate in research. There was also perceived to be a lack of sensitivity by researchers to the relationship between VCFSE organisations and their communities and how this might be affected by their participation in research. Organisations needed to consider if engagement in particular research fitted in with their overall aims and values, and had to choose projects wisely. Some organisations also expressed concerns that the trust they had carefully established with the people they work with may be broken if their research experience was not positive.

Lack of genuine partnership working

A significant barrier was the perceived lack of genuine partnership working between researchers and the sector. Being contacted and approached late in the process was a frequent issue when the agenda and priorities have already been set, leading organisations to feel that their involvement was an "after-thought". Event participants reported feeling that researchers often just 'drop in' and there was a lack of sustained engagement and longevity in relationships.

Some organisations also felt that their full research contribution potential was not maximised, and that their clients in particular wanted to contribute more than just their "lived experience". Engaging organisations and their clients in change processes and approaches that involved coproduction were highly valued.

A key message was that researchers and voluntary and community organisations want to work together, but that it takes time to build relationships, and the trust and understanding that is needed for genuine partnership working.
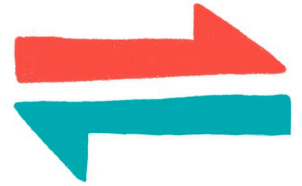
"Don't be the Uncle that only comes to see you for Christmas, build your relationship over time and keep in touch with regular catch ups that involve a wide range of stakeholders even before the research is even thought of!"

Potential solutions

Engaging with VCFSE organisations earlier in the research process

Relationships need to be collaborative and engage VCFSE organisations earlier in the research design process. There was frustration that research aims were often imposed (by researchers and/or funders) and not necessarily what VCFSE organisations and their clients wanted to do/prioritise. Opportunities to influence research questions and research direction were valued. Relationships need to be built over a long period, before the research is developed, and then sustained beyond. This avoids VCFSE organisations and their clients feeling 'intruded upon' for research.

Meaningful coproduction

A clear message was that co-production has to be meaningful, and based on an equal sharing of power in order to shape the research. This means co-production must start at the conceptual/embryonic stage of proposals to design the research, not when proposals have been in development for some time.

A participant shared an example of a project where a service user was a co-applicant and had collaborated on developing the research proposal from the beginning. She felt part of the research team and was able to make changes to the research plans. There were some disagreements about research method along the way, but the researcher explained their views for why the research needed to be done in that way, and the co-applicant and researcher then came to an agreement together about how to approach it.

We also heard that when co-production is done well it can challenge deficiently based language (e.g., language around impairment, disability), that can prejudice against working with people that use services, and enable a more positive language, based on a can-do strength-based perspective.

Appropriately costing research involvement

Some VCFSE organisations faced complexities and/or sensitivities in justifying expenditure of charitable funds on research activities. Organisations faced different pressures from their constituent members and donors about how money should be best spent. Appropriate costing of VCFSE staff time and capacity in proposals would help address these kinds of sensitivities, and ensure that research was seen and valued as part of meeting its overall mission. Working through and normalising a VCFSE applicant being allocated appropriate funding from grants to cover staffing costs would also help ensure that staff time was accurately costed by researchers and demonstrate the value placed in the VCFSE/practice-based applicant.

Recognising and valuing knowledge

Recognising and valuing the range of knowledge, skills and networks that the sector can bring to research was very important. Organisations felt that universities sometimes did not appropriately recognise their full potential for contribution to the research, and that their contribution was seen as more instrumental. For example, e.g. helping with recruitment, rather than adding to overall knowledge produced.

Networking to access research opportunities

Organisations stressed the importance of linking to wider networks and connecting with research active organisations, including local universities, where possible, in order to find out about and access research opportunities. Establishing relationships with universities in particular could help organisations establish research credibility. Universities often have an engagement office or team and this can be a good place to start with making connections, if unsure. Having an established relationship with a university could also help with wider funding applications, where an organisation could show they were creating knowledge in a particular field. Networking was viewed to be crucial in order to "get a seat at the table", and could bring wider advantages for organisations:

"Networking can be mutually beneficial, if not essential. It is a priority. One must mix at the right levels; must get known with potential funders".

Create a research culture within organisations

Event participants discussed different ways of embedding research, reflection and information-gathering in everyday work. Some organisations held "listening conversations" with clients in order to understand their needs, what they wanted to achieve, and how ongoing engagement with the services/support was meeting those needs. Such conversations were an important evaluative process, and were often developed into case studies, to prompt wider staff reflection and training. Case studies could also be a powerful tool for fundraising.

Other organisations similarly tried to hold regular forums where client concerns and/or general client feedback could be discussed, to understand how an organisation was contributing to a client's journey. Other organisations were trying to introduce the concept of research in their work with clients early on, and embed the offer of taking part in research as part of regular services/activities engaged with. This avoided clients feeling research was being 'done to them' or 'taken advantage of' and 'used' in some way for research purposes later on.

"While research can be programmed into your organisation we've always seen it as additional... where we probably fail as an organisation, we still have attitude 'oh there's a piece of research to be done, let's go out and ask the clients'...Should be more than that. There should be a regular forum to discuss research without a specific agenda".

Community researcher and peer researcher models

Some organisations had trained service users to be community or peer researchers. This improved the experience of research engagement for communities and created more sensitivity and authenticity in data gathering. Biases were often reduced. In some cases, the community or peer researchers would in turn upskill and train the wider community to take part and engage in research. This led to greater skills development and enhanced employability for individuals, and was also felt to raise aspirations among communities more generally. Community and peer researcher models were described as the way forward to produce more sustainable engagement with communities, who could be involved in the whole research cycle. However, organisations reported this could sometimes be seen to take too long by universities and/or funders. There was a call for greater investment in these types of research approaches.

Training and resources for research methods and engagement

Another suggestion was access to training and resources on research methods, e.g. ready-made toolkits and presentation materials on specific methods that were suitable for non-academic audiences. Training and resources could also include information on university and academic processes and procedures to introduce and familiarise communities with research practice in the higher education sector. Materials could also cover how to approach a university and where to start with connecting with academic researchers. This would build confidence and help VCFSE organisations and communities navigate the initial steps of research engagement.

Focus on developing key relationships

Some VCFSE organisations suggested it would be helpful to develop relationships with a small pool of researchers that could get to know the community they support, and for researchers to develop more personalised relationships and understanding with the individuals within that community. This would facilitate and encourage the community to get involved with the design of research early on, and provide an important feedback loop to inform future research. It was suggested this approach could be more effective to create in-depth understanding of issues and build research activity, than researchers and VCFSE organisations trying to 'spread themselves too thin' across too many networks and organisations. The VCFSE organisation would also be encouraged to engage as they would know that the research was to be of benefit to the people they support.

Funding for involvement in research design

Funding to facilitate involving the VCFSE sector and their communities in the research design process was important. Funding was often seen to follow successful applications only and was less available during the design stage to cover organisations and communities costs of involvement. This could limit their willingness and capacity to engage. Availability of and access to specific funding to for research design activity would facilitate engagement early on, and enable both more realistic and credible research proposals.

Improving access to research findings

Event participants talked about ways of sharing research findings that were more accessible to VCFSE organisations, both financially and in terms of content/format. One organisation was negotiating library access for a VCFSE staff member who was part of a project team with their local university. This would enable them to access academic papers/journals about research findings, as well as to carry out literature searches/reviews and better contribute to academic bids/proposals. It was suggested that library access could be built into bids/proposals for research funding to cover costs for VCFSE organisations.

Other organisations suggested alternative ways of sharing findings, that remained grounded in people's lived experience. Some VCFSE participants questioned whether the publication of someone's story by researchers 'took it away from them', and removed the person from their account too much. Alternative ways of sharing stories were suggested e.g. such as presentations/publications by the person themselves, blogs, storytelling activities and participant videos. This could be a more effective way of communicating key messages and ensure that research participants' accounts were valued and not disconnected/abstracted from the person.

Improving access to academic research funding streams

It was suggested that wider structural change was likely to be required to improve and promote access to academic funding streams for the VCFSE sector. This might encompass changes at different levels including the ways in which opportunities are shared, application processes, and eligibility criteria. In terms of the wider research funding landscape, there was agreement among VCFSE and research participants that social care research funding should be driven by a focus on supporting better outcomes for people and communities.

Regional Event 2

We asked our event participants which barriers identified in the first event were most important to address:

Which of these findings from the first workshop would you rank as most important to address?

Rank	Finding
1st	Lack of equitable partnership working
2nd	Lack of time and capacity for research
3rd	Lack of influence on agenda setting
4th	Lack of dedicated funding for research
5th	Difficulty accessing academic processes and funding streams
6th	Lack of access to research findings and usability of research
7th	Research unfamiliarity (e.g, skills, expertise, training)
8th	Cultural barriers (e.g, language sensitivity)

We then asked event participants to rank the barriers according to which they felt most confident in addressing :

Which of these findings would you feel most confident in addressing?

Rank	Finding
1st	Research unfamiliarity (e.g, skills, expertise, training)
2nd	Lack of equitable partnership working
3rd	Lack of influence on agenda setting
4th	Lack of access to research findings and usability of research
5th	Difficulty accessing academic processes and funding streams
6th	Cultural barriers (e.g, language sensitivity)
7th	Lack of time and capacity for research
8th	Lack of dedicated funding for research

Solutions to barriers

We asked event participants to identify short and longer-term actions that would help address the barriers identified, building on the solutions proposed at event 1.
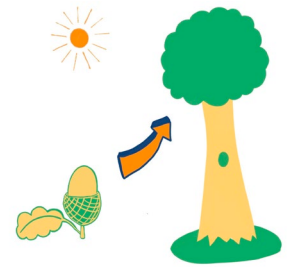
In the short term:

- Invite and encourage academic researchers to sit on voluntary and community sector networks in order to better understand the sector, priorities and challenges/issues faced.

- Improve visibility and coherence of available websites to find out what research is happening. Develop websites/online spaces for VCFSE organisations/staff to register their interest in being involved in research.

- Hold accessible events and/or conferences to share research findings with the VCFSE sector and communities, and to promote opportunities for further engagement.

- Researchers to initiate and create spaces for conversations with VCFSE organisations within universities about research opportunities, for example, 'research cafes', regular research forums, or drop-in sessions with University Engagement officers/leads. Over time, these spaces could develop to include research capacity building activity and help ensure regular engagement with the sector that continues 'between' research projects.

- Researchers to take engagement activity 'out' to the VCFSE sector, by arranging visits, community events, or approaching organisations to ask if there is anything that organisations are particularly interested in and/or think needs to be prioritised for research. This would support the sector to establish local research agendas, and also be an opportunity to share the benefits of research for the sector, and communities.

- Researchers to support smaller or research-novice organisations to understand research language through the production and use of e.g., glossaries, introductory training and resources, and explaining or adjusting language during research-focused meetings.

- Develop and provide training or guidance to finance and research teams/leads in both the VCFSE and University sector to develop appropriate costings for VCFSE involvement.

- Include appropriate renumeration in research bids for prospective VCFSE staff time. Ensure prompt payment for VCFSE involvement in research design activities and/or for public involvement work.

- Agree safeguarding and trauma-informed approaches early in research development and design, in addition to academic research ethics processes, to encourage VCFSE organisations to engage, where there are concerns about trauma and vulnerability of people that use VCFSE services that will be involved in the research.

In the longer-term:

- Build relationships up over time, to create trust and set the foundation for equitable partnerships that recognise and value the unique skills, knowledge and experience that both the VCFSE sector and academic community bring to research.

- Build feedback loops to improve the way that research findings are shared with the VCFSE sector, communities and policy-makers, so that they can be acted on/implemented, and the changes evaluated.

- Build more opportunities to share findings, generate impact and add-value from research, into the research process/cycle, to avoid communities becoming disengaged due to the longer timescales for academic research. Growing opportunities to realise immediate benefits from research would also help 'sell' research to VCFSE organisations and communities early-on.

- Develop researchers' capacity for engagement. This could include dedicated time for engagement work as part of researcher work models and/or time allocation, and access to resources to support engagement. There is a need to consider barriers to long term engagement for academics/researchers who are on short/fixed-term contracts, or who are early-career, and may face additional career development pressures.

- Grow capacity for research within VCFSE organisations by building-in specific funding for research and evaluation activity within core grant/funding applications and income streams, having dedicated research time/staff, and making research part of core organisational mission. VCFSE organisations could adopt reflective practices such as the use of listening conversations outlined in event 1, which can grow research-mindedness and skills.

- Grow mechanisms to sustain engagement between researchers and VSCE sector so that relationships and capacity-building are not lost. This could include funding for research champions, community researchers or community researcher training, or secondments.

- Grow understanding and recognition of the wider work that VCFSE organisations do to build and connect with community networks that may contribute to the overall research impact. This may include renumeration for networking activities and or/to community networks that amplify research messages, and provide feedback loops to help develop future research.

National Listening Event

What does good researcher engagement with the VCFSE look like?

- Engaging with VCFSE organisations early in the process to decide research questions, aims and priorities.

- Staying in touch in-between specific projects, and establishing long term relationships, to avoid VCFSE organisations and their clients/communities feeling intruded upon for research .

- Spending time getting to know VCFSE organisations and the people they serve, to better understand the needs and priorities of their communities, in order to improve the relevance of the research.

- Share previous research outcomes with the VCFSE to enable communities to understand what research has gone before and what it achieved, and how current/proposed research will have impact, to encourage engagement.

- Ensure research findings are shared with VCFSE organisations and communities in ways that are accessible and meaningful, and that promote their use within the communities to effect change and positive impact. E.g., research outputs could include training which could be delivered within the community.

- Opportunities scheduled into the research process to focus on relationship development e.g. spaces to promote mutual understanding of the priorities, issues and challenges faced by respective partners. Establish expectations and boundaries at the outset of collaborations.

- Opportunities for reflection and discussion about the research development and delivery built into the research process, to promote the VCFSE role in decision-making about the research.

- Recognising and valuing what researchers and the VCFSE are each uniquely bringing to the research process. Valuing the unique knowledge, skills and different ways that the VCFSE may be contributing to the research, enabling confidence that the research will be treated as having credibility.

- Respect for the time and costs that are required for the VCFSE to support research, and appropriate financial support and remuneration that reflects this. Provision of access costs to fund initial engagement.

- Providing training and support for VCFSE organisations/communities on academic funding processes and research methods, where appropriate, to facilitate their engagement. Providing such training and support in a way that equips and promotes VCFSE.

Are barriers to engagement the same for small and large VCFSE organisations?

Event participants stressed that time and capacity challenges were particularly pronounced for smaller VCFSE organisations wanting to get involved in research. Smaller VCFSE organisations found it more difficult to back-fill time in order to take part in research, as they had much smaller staff numbers, and were often already stretched to maximum staff power in delivering day-to-day services. Smaller VCFSE organisations also struggled with capacity to do the necessary networking or 'legwork' to find out about and access research opportunities. Such smaller VCFSE organisations explained they felt at a disadvantage to apply or collaborate for research funding, due to their lack of research experience and dedicated research staff to guarantee delivery, in contrast to larger, more 'research savvy' organisations, who often had a research team or lead, and more experience behind them. Unfamiliarity with the research application process, university systems, and ongoing time pressures on staff, compounded a lack of confidence among smaller VCFSE event participants to engage with research.
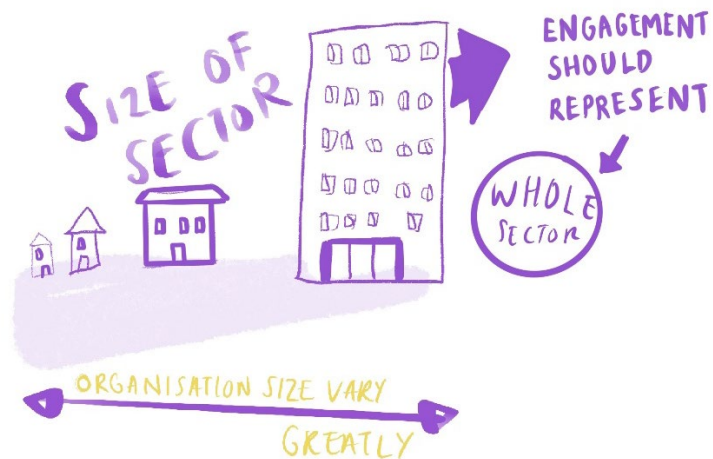
Some organisations meanwhile felt excluded from research opportunities where universities already had an established relationship with another VCFSE organisation. While long-term relationship-building and engagement with VCFSE organisations was generally lauded, it was also recognised that this approach could marginalise some VCFSE organisations, if engagement efforts were consistently focused on one or two close relationships. Event participants stressed the need for a balance between consistent engagement to build trust and understanding between researchers and particular VCFSE, and the need for researchers to seek opportunities for alternative VCFSE perspectives and/or input. The need to spread the knowledge and skills created through research engagement was also suggested by some event participants, in order to upskill and add-value for the local community and VCFSE sector as a whole.

Researchers meanwhile reported a range of experiences in working with larger and smaller VCFSE organisations, and stressed advantages and disadvantages of both. Larger organisations could be more confident and familiar with research terminology and academic procedures, and in some cases, in the largest charities, staff might be former academic researchers themselves. Larger organisations also tended to have greater infrastructure to handle university requirements (such

as finance, or research application processes), and some had similar organisational cultures (e.g., standardised practices or policies) which for the VCFSE meant working with large academic institutions was less of a 'culture shock'. However, we heard that smaller VCFSE organisations could be more flexible, creative and innovative, and their closeness to their communities and service users was seen as a real strength for the research. It could also be easier to get stronger buy-in from smaller organisations and build closer, more personalised relationships, as staff were not so likely to change.

Event participants suggested that greater support was needed for smaller VCFSE organisations to engage in research, in particular: funding to cover initial 'set up' and staff time; outreach, and taking research opportunities to smaller organisations rather than expecting them to approach universities; training to build research skills and confidence; and support with dissemination and implementation of findings.

Key Recommendations

- **Increase access to and build awareness of research opportunities for the VCFSE sector**. Our events suggested that researchers and research funders need to develop their communication methods for sharing social care research opportunities with the sector, including websites and other online spaces, which do not always give clear details about who to contact or how to access opportunities. We heard that NIHR could promote the work of the James Lind Alliance more widely in developing funding priorities, and the role of the NIHR Research Design Service in facilitating conversations with funders and researchers. Making greater use of social media and other channels accessed by the sector could be valuable.

  Researchers/universities could hold local networking events and host research engagement 'cafes', 'drop-ins' or forums, at both university and community spaces. Researchers may need to be particularly proactive in sharing opportunities with smaller VCFSE organisations. VCFSE organisations can identify networking opportunities and grow and develop their relationships with social care researchers and Universities locally. There is a role for VCFSE infrastructure organisations, such as BVSC, in facilitating such networks and co-hosting networking and engagement opportunities.

- There is a need for researchers to **engage VCFSE organisations earlier in the research process** to determine research questions, aims and objectives, and ensure research plans are feasible and reflect the priorities of people that use VCFSE services. Researchers could adopt some of the same strategies outlined above, such as research 'cafes', 'drop-ins', and forums, and improve their outreach to community spaces to facilitate such conversations with VCFSE organisations.

- Funders such as NIHR could **promote opportunities for the sector to identify and influence social care research priorities.** This could take the form of a series of (funded) national and regional events, that also involve local authorities and social care practitioners, to establish research agendas, and promote research partnerships.

- **Promote seed funding for VCFSE involvement in research design**. We heard that the majority of research funding tends to follow successful applications, and that seed funding for VCFSE organisations was required to facilitate VCFSE involvement earlier in research design processes, particularly for smaller VCFSE organisations who find it harder to back-fill time.

- We heard that **Co-production needs to be meaningful** based on an equal sharing of power to shape the research. This can be facilitated through engaging VCFSE organisations as co-applicants/co-leads early on and considering VCFSE support and access needs. There also needs to be **shared recognition by researchers and VCFSE organisations of the unique skills, knowledge, and networks that each partner brings** to all stages of the research process.

- Our events highlighted the value of community researcher and peer researcher models of research, which promote shared learning and dissemination. Researchers and VCFSE
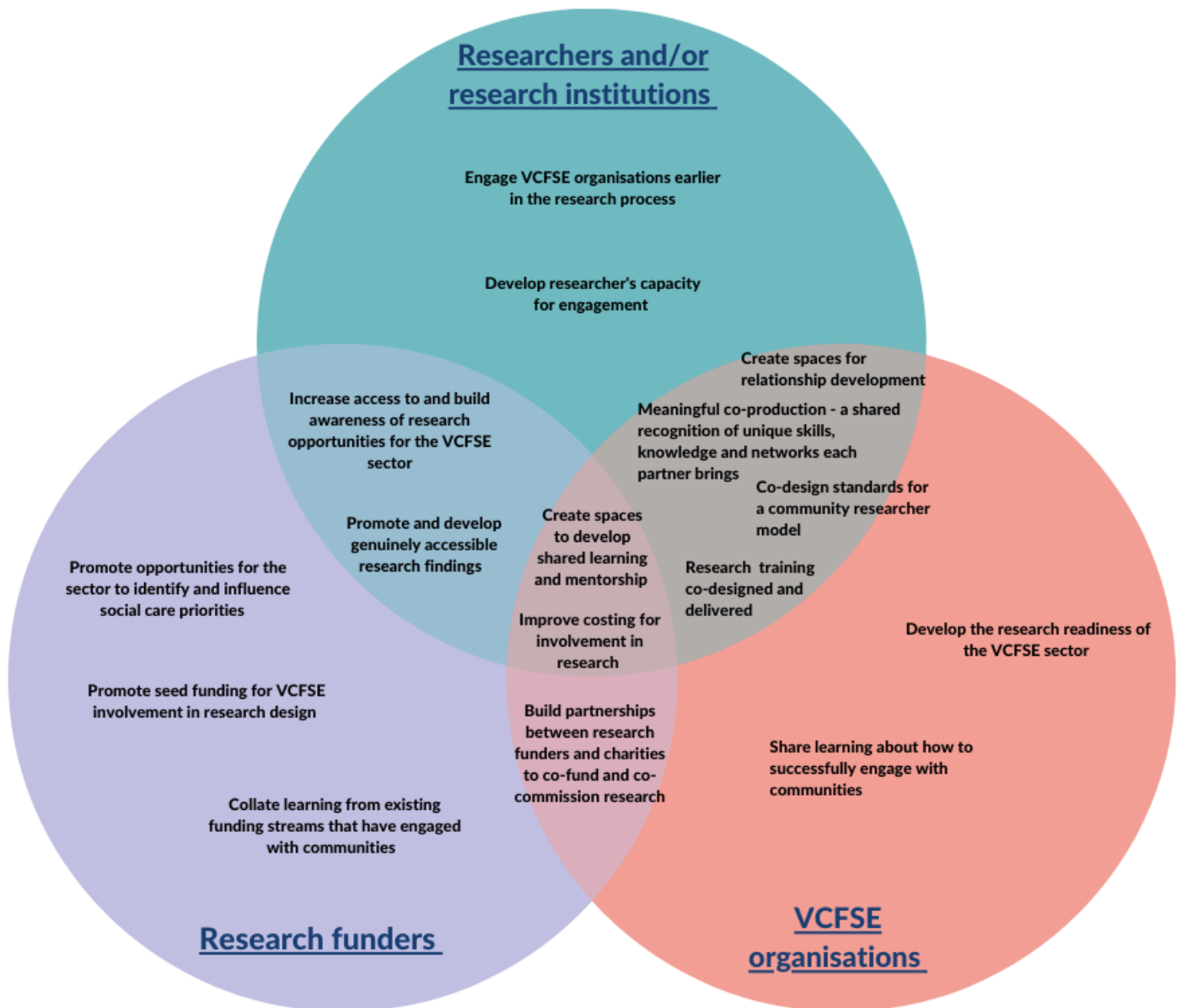
organisations could **collaborate to co-design standards for a community researcher model,** sharing mutual knowledge and expertise.

- **Create spaces for relationship development and partnership building activities.** Dedicated time and opportunities to focus on relationship/partnership development need to be built into research projects. Researchers and VCFSE could make use of engagement events and regular engagement spaces (cafes/drop-ins/forums) to develop relationships, and continue engagement between projects. NIHR Centre for Engagement and Dissemination could lead on collating examples of good partnership practice and case studies in social care research, highlighting how problems were solved, and ones which remain unresolved, to improve community engagement and make these accessible to VCFSE organisations and researchers.

- Our events identified a need to **provide research training and extra support** for some VCFSE organisations who may be less research experienced. However, it can be expensive for VCFSE organisations to employ University researchers to deliver this. There is a need to think about ways in which such **research training can be co-designed and co-delivered** by researchers and VCFSE organisations to improve accessibility, and support research capacity-building.

- **Promote and develop genuinely accessible research findings**. Our events identified a need to consider how research findings will be disseminated and used from the outset of proposal development, and to consider this from a perspective of co-design. NIHR has clear expectations regarding social care research impact. Funding application guidance could include recommendations regarding the co-design of dissemination strategies and research outputs so that they are genuinely meaningful for VCFSE organisations and communities.

- Our event participants suggested that both researchers and VCFSE organisations **need to get better at costing involvement in research.** VCFSE organisations must be realistic about staff time and the different types of activities required to support research. This might include networking activities, developing materials, supporting people that use VCFSE services to take part in research, and supporting dissemination. Researchers need to provide appropriate renumeration for VCFSE partners and account for the full costs of their time and input. Research funders including NIHR could provide clear guidance and expectations within application processes to facilitate this.

- **Develop the research readiness of the VCFSE sector.** Larger organisations may have dedicated organisational resource and/or staff for research, but this may be more challenging for smaller VCFSE organisations. VCFSE organisations could build on existing reflective processes and evaluation practices (such as holding listening conversations with people that use services and/or questionnaires), to promote a 'research minded' culture, and strive to embed research as a core part of organisational mission. VCFSE organisations could also develop research champion roles to promote research, as part of staff CPD.

- **Create spaces to develop shared learning and mentorship between VCFSE organisations and the research community.** For example, we heard that Autistica provided mentoring opportunities for academic staff. Universities could promote opportunities for community researchers or secondments to the VCFSE sector as part of CPD activities and researchers could sit on voluntary sector networks to improve understanding. We also heard that some Universities provide students with the opportunity to conduct a research project with a

local VCFSE. This provides the charity with a finished product to demonstrate the benefits of research. NIHR could promote and resource such activities as part of standard funding applications where appropriate, develop this aspect of its Fellowship schemes, and make wider use of initiatives such as the Link and Learn scheme to promote community research mentorship.
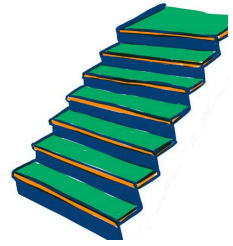
- NIHR could **collate learning from existing funding streams that have engaged with communities** to understand lessons learnt and consider ways to adopt learning and practices across social care funding streams. This could promote changes at different levels including the ways opportunities are shared, application processes and eligibility criteria, to facilitate VCFSE engagement.

- **Build partnerships between research funders and charities to co-fund and co-commission research.** We heard about one such example of Autistica working in partnership with NIHR RfSC programme to fund research around neuro-diversity. NIHR could build on this initiative, collate learning from the experience, and expand opportunities to work in partnership with charities and VCFSE organisations to create research calls and establish research priorities in different areas of social care.

- **Develop researchers' capacity for engagement**. There is a need to consider barriers to (especially long-term) engagement activity for academics/researchers who are on short/fixed-term contracts, or who are early-career, and may face additional career development pressures. Further exploration and discussion of these issues could be facilitated by research funders through e.g. a discussion paper, or organisation of a seminar.

An overview of the key recommendations for researchers and/or research institutions, research funders and VCFSE organisations to facilitate better engagement of the VCFSE sector in social care research.

<u>Researchers and/or research institutions</u>

Engage VCFSE organisations earlier in the research process

Develop researcher's capacity for engagement

Create spaces for relationship development

Meaningful co-production - a shared recognition of unique skills, knowledge and networks each partner brings

Co-design standards for a community researcher model

Increase access to and build awareness of research opportunities for the VCFSE sector

Create spaces to develop shared learning and mentorship

Research training co-designed and delivered

Promote and develop genuinely accessible research findings

Improve costing for involvement in research

Promote opportunities for the sector to identify and influence social care priorities

Develop the research readiness of the VCFSE sector

Promote seed funding for VCFSE involvement in research design

Build partnerships between research funders and charities to co-fund and co-commission research

Share learning about how to successfully engage with communities

Collate learning from existing funding streams that have engaged with communities

<u>Research funders</u>

<u>VCFSE organisations</u>

Next steps

Based on the above recommendations, we suggest the following actions could be taken by researchers, VCFSE organisations and research support organisations:

- Localities/regions could scope existing networks and activities in the field of VCFSE and community-based research for social care, to pool resources and avoid duplication

- Academic researchers and VCFSE organisations could come together to co-design and deliver a shared Community Researcher Training Programme based on best practice, creating a local/regional toolkit of training delivery, that enables delivery in a range of settings and leads.

- Development of a Community Research Hub within regions/localities which brings together best practice toolkits, information, training, and dissemination pathways for health and social care.

- Develop and disseminate a comprehensive suite of available training opportunities for academic researchers, NHS and social care practitioners and VCFSE organisations, to share best practice, develop relationships/networks, and start to develop shared understanding across and between organisations working in health and social care.

- Based on existing research activity, understand the key priorities identified by communities and by VCSFE organisations, and ensure they have agency in influencing the social care research agenda, synthesising learning from various activities already underway.

Useful Resources

The links below are to websites that contain resources to support VCSFE organisations engage in research. A number of resources have been produced to support engagement with the public to promote and support inclusion and diversity in research and these may also be useful.

[National Institute for Health and Care Research (NIHR) provides information](#) about how people that use health and social care services, carers and members of the public can get involved in research and sets out standards for involvement. There are links to comprehensive briefing notes for researchers to support them in involving people and communities in research.

[NIHR Payment for Public Involvement in Research Guidance](#) provides guidance to help organisations determine the most appropriate payment approach for involvement.

['That Co-production Podcast' (NIHR)](#) is a series of episodes, approximately 30 minutes each, covering key issues including the Difference between co-production and public involvement in research, Creative approaches in co-production, and Valuing relationships in co-production.

[NIHR Reaching Out](#) is a practical guide to being inclusive in public involvement in health research and outlines lessons learnt from engaging with communities.

[Social Care Institute for Excellence (SCIE) have produced a report](#) outlining good practice in user, care and public involvement in social care research.

[National Council for Voluntary Organisations](#) (NCVO) is a membership organisation for which there is a fee and provides resources to help VCFSE organisations carry out research that involves or will benefit users of services and to make sense of and use research.

[Association for Research in the Voluntary and Community Sector](#) (ARVAC) has produced a Community Research Toolkit to support funders, commissioners and practitioners which is shareable provided they are cited, and membership is free.

[National Coordinating Centre for Public Engagement](#) (NCCPE) provide freely available resources to help community groups make contact and work with academic partners to develop mutually beneficial partnerships.

[NCCPE Ethics in Participatory Research](#) provides links and resources to help researchers navigate ethical issues and challenges in community-based participatory research projects.

[The Shared Learning Group on Involvement](#) provides links to the Charities Research Involvement Group and useful resources, blogs, news, and events. Registration is required and there is a cost for membership.

[University of Bristol/Connected Communities](#) 'Creating Living Knowledge' is a useful report about the opportunities and tensions working in the University/Community space. Chapter four details difference coproduction methods and the theories they are rooted in.

[University of Durham Centre for Social Justice and Community Action](#) is a website detailing toolkits and guides for community engagement.

[Community Connections Community Researchers and Community Researcher Training](#) provides an overview of how community researchers supported a range of research projects.

[Powercube](#), developed by The Participation, Power and Social Change team at the Institute of Development Studies, University of Sussex, provides resources for understanding and exploring power in research relationships.